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SUBJECT: ASAD DISCUSSES IRAN AND GAZA WITH CODEL SPECTER

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Maura Connelly for reasons 1.4(b,d)

Summary

¶1. (C) In a December 30 meeting with CODEL Specter, a relaxed President Bashar al-Asad dismissed Israeli concerns that Iran might use a nuclear weapon against the Jewish state and explained why he could not abandon his political alliance with Tehran. Asad argued that the international discussion must change from a debate about Iran's "right" to pursue a nuclear program to a discussion of appropriate monitoring mechanisms, coupled with incentives from the P5 1 countries. On Syrian-Israeli peace talks, Asad characterized the cessation of indirect negotiations as an "unfortunate reverse for both sides," but said, "we have to deal with this (Gaza) first." Asad was hopeful that a way could be found to resume negotiations after the upcoming Israeli elections and expressed optimism that the Obama administration might be helpful. On Gaza, Bashar said Syria would push for a humanitarian cease-fire at the Arab League Ministerial conference. He claimed that Hamas had become more moderate over the last two years and described Khalid Mesha'al as a centrist because he had publicly stated that Hamas would accept a return to the 1967 borders. Regarding a new U.S. embassy compound in Damascus, Bashar said, "We will help you find the land. We want a new embassy and we want a new ambassador." End Summary

Iran "Could Not" Nuke Israel

¶2. (S) Recalling the Israeli attack on al-Kibar in 2007 and on Iraq's nuclear reactor in 1981, Senator Arlen Specter (R-PA) told President Bashar al-Asad on December 30 that many Israeli politicians feel pressure to soon act militarily against Iran's nuclear program. The Senator pointed to Iranian President Ahmadinejad's continuing rhetoric about wiping Israel off the earth and asked Asad what he would recommend to try to avoid a war between Israel and Iran. Asad replied that, "Ahmadinejad is not the ruler of Iran. The ruler is Khamanei." Dismissing the Israeli concerns, he said, "Khamanei could not use nuclear weapons (against Israel) because (such weapons) would also kill Palestinians."

I Can't Turn My Back on Iran

13. (S) President Asad told Senator Specter that he "could not turn my back to Iran." Asad explained, "Iran supported my cause when the U.S. was against me, when France was against me . . . how can I say no?" He continued, "Iran is an influential country . . . whether we like it or not. If Syria is also to be an influential country, it can't be isolated. That is why we are deepening our ties with Turkey and others." "That doesn't mean we support any nuclear program," he clarified. "We just don't want to deny any country's right (to enrich uranium). Iran has the right . . . I have the right . . . nobody can take the right away from us. We support monitoring."

Asad Offers His Solution

14. (S) Senator Specter countered that if monitoring was the key, why was Iran not allowing the IAEA access to conduct such monitoring? Asad answered that the current political stalemate with Iran stems from the UNSC's involvement, which had offended Iranian "national pride" and provided the Iranians an "excuse to be stubborn." Asad suggested that any monitoring process should be made to be "professional," rather than "political" in order to gain Iranian acceptance. Next, he said that Iran should be given "incentives" by "the six countries," such as a removing economic sanctions and offering a non-aggression agreement. "You can't discuss Iran's right (to enrich uranium), you must talk about monitoring their program . . . with incentives," he concluded. Senator Specter asked Asad how the West can trust the Iranians when they seem to be so secretive? Asad responded that the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) contained technical and verification requirements that removed the need to rely on trust.

15. (S) Bashar claimed that French President Sarkozy's "two advisors" (Levitte and Gueant) had accepted his advice that the West would not achieve anything with Iran by arguing over Iran's "right" to pursue nuclear energy. He revealed that Syria had been facilitating a direct meeting between the French and Iranians, but said that Sarkozy's recent "negative declaration" against Iran had caused the Iranians to cancel the meeting. Despite this setback, Asad was confident that he had persuaded the French to change the discussion from arguing about Iran's "right" to a discussion about IAEA monitoring options and incentive packages from the P5 1 countries. "This," he claimed, "is the solution."

16. (S) The Senator asked Asad why Iran would want the P5 1 countries involved, if Iran was unwilling to abide by UNSC resolutions, since the UNSC contained five of the same countries. Asad answered that Iran's problem was not with the countries involved, but with the political stigma attached to the UNSC, which Iran perceives is "just used for sanctions." Asad said that during his summer trip to Tehran, the Iranians had told him that they would not change their position until the issue is out of the UNSC and the U.S. "stops playing political games." (Comment: Bashar wasn't clear on the P5 1 composition and never used that term. He referred to it as the Europeans with Russia until FM Muallim corrected him. The notable aspect here is that previous visitors (including Sarkozy and Miliband) reported that Bashar seemed not to have focused on the Iran nuclear issue and was uninformed. It is unclear whether his proposal is his own, Muallim's, or someone else's. End comment.)

Syrian-Israeli Peace Negotiations

17. (S/NF) Bashar said that the Turks had announced they had stopped their involvement in the Israeli-Syrian peace talks as a result of the situation in Gaza, and that Syria had agreed with the Turkish move. Asad characterized the cessation of indirect negotiations as an "unfortunate reverse for both sides," but said, "we have to deal with this (Gaza) first." Asad claimed that the indirect negotiations with

Israel had so far "gone perfectly" and said that he had been "very optimistic." He said he was hopeful that a way could be found to resume negotiations after the upcoming Israeli elections and expressed optimism that the Obama administration might be helpful.

¶8. (S/NF) Asad said, "We expected (Israeli Prime Minister) Olmert to do something dramatic after he told (Turkish Prime Minister) Erdogan Israel would give up the Golan," but that subsequent Israeli foot-dragging had been disappointing. According to Bashar, the Syrians had attempted to "probe" for a sign of Israeli seriousness by starting with three baseline geographical points. "If they accept these three," Asad said, "then we know they are serious. So far," he added, "they haven't accepted." (Comment: Asad did not explain the apparent contradiction between this statement and his earlier contention that the negotiations had "gone perfectly." End comment.)

¶9. (S/NF) Asad looked to his Foreign Minister, and Muallim described Syria's "three points" as dealing with the "line of June 4, 1967: the north, the south and the middle." In return, Muallim said, the Israelis had posed five questions to the Syrians regarding security, or "what will happen after the peace," as he put it. Muallim said that Syria had prepared its answers to the five questions and deposited them with the Turks, whose role Bashar described as a "bank." The Turks (and Syria), he claimed, were waiting on the Israelis to deposit their answers to Syria's three points before sharing Syria's answers with the Israelis. Bashar concluded, "Once we get (Israeli) agreement on these three points, we can begin direct negotiations on more technical subjects, such as water, positioning of military forces, access to the land, etc." Olmert, said Bashar, ought to be a strong leader and provide a response to the Syrians but is instead more interested in the election of "his friends."

¶10. (S/NF) Senator Specter told Asad that PM Olmert had told him that some day he would like to stay at the Damascus Four Seasons Hotel. Laughing politely, Asad replied, "After peace, okay," and then quipped, "but he will pay the bill . . . not me." Growing serious, Asad said, "The line of 1967 is the key to the Four Seasons. The Golan is . . . everything."

Discussion of Israeli Politics

¶11. (S/NF) Asad said his "people" were telling him that it looked increasingly likely that Likud Chairman Benyamin Netanyahu would soon again be Israeli Prime Minister, and asked the Senator what Netanyahu had told him regarding peace negotiations with Syria. The Senator responded that Bibi remained cautious about the subject for now, perhaps because he was still gauging the Israeli electorate's desire for peace with Syria. Asad asked the Senator to "advise the Israeli politicians that they should not make peace wait for elections or it would never happen." The Senator responded that Israeli politicians would never have the power to make peace if they couldn't first get themselves elected.

On Gaza and Hamas

¶12. (S/NF) FM Muallim asked Senator Specter, "How can we convince the Israelis that what they are doing (in Gaza) is against their interests? They can't finish Hamas. Hamas is stronger now than ever before. They can't make air strikes without killing civilians. Can you ask the Israelis for a humanitarian truce, to bring medicine into Gaza and allow the wounded to be evacuated?" Asad suggested, "The word 'humanitarian' is an . . . easy approach . . . to a political desire for a cease fire." Senator Specter said that he would support a humanitarian cease-fire, and hoped that both parties might use such a cease-fire to try to build a more lasting peace. Bashar said that he had asked FM Muallim to propose a humanitarian cease-fire during the December 31 emergency Arab League Ministerial meeting in Cairo, and that

he would be discussing it with Turkish PM Erdogan in Damascus.

¶13. (S/NF) When Senator Specter pressed Asad on Hamas' insistence on Israel's destruction, Asad said Khalid Mesha'al had stated publicly that Hamas would accept a return to the pre-war 1967 border demarcation of Israel. Asad said this statement had implied acceptance of Israel's existence, but "nobody had encouraged (praised) Hamas for saying this." Asad said Mesha'al had also stated publicly that Hamas would accept whatever final peace agreement with Israel the Palestinian people accepted. When Senator Specter asked how the Palestinian people's voices could be measured, Asad suggested by referendum.

¶14. (S/NF) Asad claimed Hamas had changed over the last two years, and mused that living in Syria had had a moderating effect on Khalid Mesha'al. (Note: Asad often said "Hamas" when he seemed to be referring to Mesha'al. End note.) Bashar characterized Hamas as similar to any political movement in that it had its own "right wing, left wing and middle." He described Mesha'al as a centrist because he had said -- more than once -- that Hamas would accept a return to the 1967 borders. "You need dynamism in politics and a desire to seize even the smallest opportunity," he explained, suggesting that Israel and the West had missed such an opportunity by not praising Hamas for Mesha'al's conciliatory statement.

On Lebanon and Hizballah

¶15. (S/NF) In response to a question from Senator Specter, Bashar said Israel could not be concerned about Lebanese independence after occupying it and destroying it several times. Becoming defensive, Asad described the Syrian-Lebanese conflict as a "bilateral issue," and said "you can't tell me to leave Lebanon and then ask me to control it." Regarding internal Lebanese political conflicts, Asad said, "We helped them solve their problems at Doha, and so did the Qataris." Since then, he continued, Syria has made two of three steps towards normalizing relations with Lebanon. The first, he said, was the public announcement of Syria's intention to establish diplomatic relations with Lebanon. The second step was sending Syrian diplomats the previous week to open the Syrian Embassy in Beirut. The final step will be sending an ambassador, but the key was establishing diplomatic relations and opening the embassy. Shrugging resignedly, he said "Our process is slow." Chuckling slightly, he added, "Syria moves slowly."

¶16. (S/NF) Bashar denied that Syria was providing arms to Hamas, saying that Syria couldn't deliver arms overland through Jordan nor by sea to Gaza. Asad shifted the blame to Egypt for allowing arms smuggling into Gaza, saying, "We do not allow arms shipments to go through Syria . . . for my security, and not because we are Israel's bodyguards." Regarding Hizballah, Asad protested, "I can't talk about Hamas and Hizballah. Hizballah is in Lebanon, Hamas is in Palestine. A comprehensive peace is necessary to solve these issues."

Heated Exchange on New Embassy

¶17. (C) Senator Specter raised the request for a new U.S. Embassy compound (NEC) in Damascus, and Asad said that he had recently spoken about this issue with former President Jimmy Carter. Asad asked if anyone from the Embassy was present in the meeting and the Charge d'Affaires identified herself. FM Muallim said that the Damascus Community School (DCS) site was not an acceptable alternative for a NEC, arguing that the residential neighborhood was unsuitable for an embassy. Charge pointed out that both the Emirati and Qatari Embassies were located on the DCS compound, so there was precedent for another embassy in the neighborhood. Muallim then said that the Qataris had complained about the noise of a construction

project at DCS last summer and said that building an embassy there would be "too much," to which Asad seemed to agree.

¶18. (C) Regarding the original SARG plan to relocate all embassies several kilometers outside of Damascus to an as yet undeveloped "diplomatic quarter" in Yafour, Asad said softly, "We are revising our plans for a diplomatic quarter." Charge then suggested the Kfar Souseh neighborhood as a potential site and Asad nodded non-committally, offering "or somewhere else on the margins of Damascus." A visibly irritated Muallim then said, "The only formal request we have from you is for land in Yafour." Charge responded that this was because Yafour was where the MFA had told us we must go. Charge again stated the USG desire to consider other locations, and asked for Syrian help in finding suitable land. Raising his voice, Muallim said, "It's not our job to find you land," and repeated the statement about our formal request for Yafour. Charge suggested that perhaps Muallim did not have accurate information, and explained that she had recently discussed four acceptable options with the MFA Chief of Protocol. A clearly uncomfortable Asad attempted to regain control of the discussion by offering his assurance that an appropriate solution could be found. Charge directly asked Asad if he would help us obtain the land for a new embassy, and Bashar replied, "Yes, we will help you find the land. We want a new embassy and we want a new ambassador." Charge thanked Asad, and told him it would be important to resolve the new embassy issue before a new ambassador arrived.

Comment

¶19. (S/NF) Notably, there was no discussion of the October 26 raid on Abu Kamal and even when Senator Specter raised the al-Kibar attack in the context of Iran, Bashar did not take the bait. We plan to pursue Asad's promise to help us obtain land for a NEC, although the MFA may well try to walk it back. End comment.

Participation

¶20. (U) U.S.A.:
Senator Arlen Specter (R-PA)
Charge d'Affaires Maura Connelly
Legislative Director Christopher Bradish
Colonel Phillip Skuta, USMC
CAPT Ronald Smith, MC, USN
Notetaker Andrew Abell

Syrian Arab Republic:
President Bashar al-Asad
Foreign Minister Walid al-Muallim
Presidential Advisor Buthayna Shaaban
Unknown male Presidential Palace Staffer

¶21. (U) CODEL Specter did not clear this report.
CONNELLY